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‘...O Master of secret configurations...’

Reflections on the Adorno/Berg Correspondences

‘...by what chord would one diagnose the Marxist confession in a piece of music, and by what colour the Fascist one in a picture?’¹

Arnold Schoenberg

‘Dear Master and teacher...’

The German philosopher and aesthetic theorist Theodor W. Adorno (1903-1969) is still regarded by many as one of the most distinguished interpreters of culture and art of the twentieth century. The Austrian composer Alban Berg (1885- 1935) developed a highly personal adaptation of Schoenberg's twelve tone technique to become the most broadly accepted representative of the Second Viennese School. Recently a new English edition of the Adorno/Berg correspondences was published which covers the period from 1925 until Berg's death in late 1935.² Opinions about Berg's music will unlikely be altered on reading these letters. However, they do provide us with quite a unique overview of the period and sometimes even mundane aspects of daily life can be interesting and enlightening.³ There is no doubt that correspondences can bring us closer to the characters in question, allow us a special insight into their peculiar foibles and eccentricities. The very nature of the genre, furthermore, introduces us tantalisingly to other personages and events without necessarily providing the full biographies or contexts (many aspects and details being already known to the writers). The result is a labyrinth of half-sketched secondary characters and scenes that may prove either frustrating, or, may offer the reader delicious crumbs of information enticing him or her on to pursue further searches elsewhere in a desire to fill in the missing fragments of the story. This is why the Adorno/Berg correspondences should be read only with an understanding of the various contexts within which they were written - the relative youth of Adorno, Berg's own unstinting loyalty to Schoenberg and his ambivalence to politics, the rapid rise of Nazism in Central Europe, the influence of Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt School on Adorno's shifting interpretations of Marxism, not to mention the petty back biting and jealousies which infiltrate any close-knit group.

Immediately, the Adorno/Berg letters reveal the last vestiges of the traditional teacher-student relationship which were common in *fin de siècle* Europe. They display a formality from the start; the writers were clearly participating, in a self-conscious manner, in the act of correspondence. Little of their personal lives seeps through; the tone throughout is rather solemn and serious. Adorno had started taking private classes in composition with Berg in 1925 as soon as he had arrived in Vienna. The student's early letters are almost sycophantic in their manner and although as the philosopher matured over the years and the relationship between teacher and student metamorphosed into one of equals (at least in their respective fields), Adorno continued throughout the ten years of correspondence to address his letters to his 'Dear master and teacher', despite the fact that he studied with Berg for only six months! Although the correspondences show that Berg

¹ Arnold Schoenberg, 'Does the World Lack a Peace-Hymn?' - Style and Idea p. 500

² Theodor W. Adorno & Alban Berg Correspondences 1925 - 1935: 2005 Polity Press, Cambridge ISBN: 0-7456-2335-2 (All quotes will be from this source unless otherwise stated).

³ There are some wonderful exceptions. Berg often referred to the I.S.C.M. (the International Society for Contemporary Music) as the I.G.f.l.m.i.A., standing for 'Internationale Gesellschaft für leck mich im Arsch' - International Society for kiss my arse!

was quite willing to accept this precept in the relationship, he (we know), willingly played the part of the obsequious disciple in his relationship with Schoenberg - a curious fact demonstrating a hierarchical tendency within of the close circle that comprised the Second Viennese School - Adorno's subservience to Berg paralleled Berg's subservience to Schoenberg. In fact, Schoenberg is the unseen spectre behind these letters, the invisible hub of many discussions, commentaries, devotions and criticisms.

The correspondences cover a period in which Berg had established his reputation as a leading figure in new music (gaining almost equal stature to that of Schoenberg) and when Adorno was in his twenties and just embarking on his career as a philosopher and composer. So we gain access to the latter's early, developing personal insights into Berg's compositions of the period from *Wozzeck* to the *Violin Concerto*. In the majority of cases, Berg's letters are responsorial. The younger Adorno is the one searching, commenting, beseeching; his critical announcements are often shaded by his desire to please his teacher (this, again parallels Berg's letters to Schoenberg). Here, Berg is the instructor, the one who offers the advice and council. But it is the essential intimacy of the exchange that allows us access to thoughts and ideas that we would not otherwise be privy to. It is precisely because these private correspondences offered each his cover and protection that we can now (in a rather voyeuristic way) avail of a new understanding of them. This is what makes the letters interesting and valuable. They allow us to contemplate Adorno's growing politicisation (Lucaks, Kracauer and Bloch were three major influences on Adorno in his early years - they were all unorthodox, philosophising Marxists).⁴ They provide an opportunity to observe the rise of Nazism, and to review portraits of Berg, Webern, Schoenberg and Stravinsky (in a way, incidentally, that does not always enhance Adorno's standing). They also expose that entourage mentality and pretentiousness that belong to the less appealing side of the Schoenberg circle to which Adorno strove (but ultimately failed) to be accepted into.

***Wozzeck* as a 'proletarian tragedy - opera'**

Although *Wozzeck* was completed in 1922, the opera dominates many of the early letters as it received its première at the Staatsoper Unter den Linden (Berlin) in December 1925 (the year in which the correspondences began).⁵ The letters highlight Adorno's central role as propagandist to the cause of twelve-tone music and both Berg's and Schoenberg's centrality in that credo. In fact, *Wozzeck* was the subject of one of Adorno's first major essays and it is curious to note that both Berg and Schoenberg were already attempting to rein in the young philosopher's political extremism, to restrict his language to the central issue of the music. Berg, at one point, entreats Adorno - 'But one request!! Do not write anything *difficult*! You no doubt have so much to say about it (*Wozzeck*), & I want those who read it to *learn* all that from you. But they can only do that - as they are mostly just musicians & music-lovers - if you express yourself in *generally comprehensible* terms.' Despite these objections, Adorno's writing style would remain rhetorical, prolix, extravagant and polemic, as can be observed when he outlined to Berg what he hoped to achieve with the article: to highlight a 'theory of variation' both in Schoenberg and Berg and to

⁴ Georg Lukács (1885-1971) was a Hungarian Marxist philosopher, writer, and literary critic who influenced the mainstream of European Communist thought during the first half of the 20th century. Siegfried Kracauer (1889- 1966) was a journalist, sociologist, and film critic. Ernst Simon Bloch (1885 -1977) was a German Marxist philosopher and atheist theologian.

⁵ Karl Georg Büchner (1813 – 1837) was a German dramatist and writer of prose. His play *Woyzeck* was first published in 1837.

make a connection between Berg and Mahler. In so doing, he wished to explore the music in terms of the ‘...continuity of the underlying thinking, the conceptual simultaneity and factual equality of intentions; so not “sections”, themes to be grasped in isolation.’ At this very early stage we can see how Adorno viewed Berg (and the Second Viennese School) as the inheritors of the Germanic legacy, the latest manifestation of a tradition that extended via Mahler, the early Romantics, Beethoven and back to Bach. The reference to ‘...so not “sections”, themes to be grasped in isolation’ clearly sets out, from the start, Adorno’s position, his lines of demarcation: neo-classical art fell outside the lineage, the inherited ‘truth’.

An early example of Adorno’s entrenched political stance can be observed in a letter concerned with the suitability of Georg Büchner’s play ‘*Woyzeck*’ as a libretto for an opera (this was made in the context of Adorno’s rejection of *Und Pippa tanzt* by Gerhart Hauptmann, which Berg was considering for a libretto at time of the letter).⁶ On *Und Pippa tanzt* he says ‘In its eerie and light character...the play certainly seems well enough suited to music...But this seems to me an illusion. *Wozzeck*’s suitability for music grew from its history, which brought to light its metapsychological (popularly “expressionist”) aspects...Hauptmann’s fairy-tale elements since *Hannele* (published 1883), on the other hand, are sentimental corrections undertaken after the fact by a naturalism that no longer believes itself. Hauptmann poeticises a rigid object-world. In Büchner’s case, however, the demonic nature of reification through bourgeois society is precisely the poetic agent. But music can only encounter true, hidden and genuine fairy-tales, not illusory, manifest and poetically derived ones’. In this, Adorno is suggesting that stylised libretti cannot serve Berg’s music and claims that only those works that are in themselves historically relevant, rather than stories of past history, can be suitable for him. ‘And how fitting it is that this German tragedy, which is the closest to Marx, was destined to be captured by your music, for your music has captured it in its history instead of depicting it compositionally.’ The rejection of the stylised entity can be understood as a rejection of a received, objectivised idea. This clearly parallels his rejection of a received, objectivised classicism, that is, the stylised libretto was understood as an accessory of neo-classicism. Adorno was, very early on, insisting on an art situated in (and created out of) an historically pertinent moment, that fulfilled the zeitgeist of the new century, as he understood it. It seems that Berg did not involve himself in this political argument (as will be seen later).

It is important to note that Adorno’s primary interpretation of *Wozzeck* was one which situated it as a significant work of subjectivist art, that is, that it had few ramifications for a broader political reading. It was only as a direct result of his ongoing relationship with Walter Benjamin that he came to alter his initial interpretation.⁷ It becomes clear from a letter to Berg, that Adorno’s philosophy was being challenged and altered by his ‘...extensive confrontation with Benjamin’ (the latter’s stylistic and conceptual traits were to maintain their influence, even on Adorno’s later works as *Minima moralia* demonstrates). In relation to *Wozzeck*, he seems to have shifted from an interpretation of the story as one governed by ‘inwardness’ - one that survives through its own signification, towards a more leftist interpretation of ‘extensivity’ - here, one gets the feeling that

⁶ Prominent German dramatist of the early 20th century, Gerhart Hauptmann (1862-1946) won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1912. His early naturalistic plays are still frequently performed. Hauptmann’s best-known works include *The Weavers* (1893), a humanist drama of a rebellion against the mechanisms of the Industrial Revolution, and *Hannele* (1884), about the conflict between reality and fantasy. *Und Pippa tanzt* (And Pippa dances) was premièred in the Lessingtheater, Berlin in 1906.

⁷ Walter Benjamin (1892 – 1940) was a German Jewish Marxist literary critic and philosopher. He was at times associated with the Frankfurt School of critical theory, and was also greatly inspired by the Marxism of Bertolt Brecht and the Jewish mysticism of Gershom Scholem.

Adorno is stretching his vocabulary in order to accommodate his new stance without abandoning his original one. 'My philosophy has been undergoing great developments....politically it has brought me decisively closer to communism...' He now sees *Wozzeck* as a 'proletarian tragedy - opera'. Later he offers 'But to think that this music is so strong that it compels the audience at the same time as snubbing it - this is a truly exemplary and real revolutionary sign that goes beyond the state of subjectivist isolation!'

Indeed, European politics was at this time fast developing into a game of two halves - the Fascistic right and the Marxist left. Early performances of *Wozzeck* met with some rejection from right-wing circles and the letters offer us a fascinating glimpse of the unfolding crisis. Opposition manifested itself most starkly in Czechoslovakia during the opera's third Prague performance on the 16th. of November 1925. During the second Act there were 'scandalous scenes' and, to add to the debacle, the Deputy Lord Mayor (in the audience) died of a stroke. The Bohemian State Committee, taking advantage of the situation, had ruled after this spectacle that further performances of the opera would be forbidden. Numerous Czech musicians, writers and artists protested against the decree in vain. The actual success of the opera was the cause of the objection from the Czech Nationalists ('virtually Nazis' in Berg's view) and the Clerical lobby: '...they staged the scandal at the 3rd. performance...So it was purely political! (To them I am the Berlin Jew Alban (Aaron?) Berg. Ostrcil (was, in their view) bribed by the Russian Bolsheviks, the whole thing arranged by the 'Elders of Zion' etc.).'⁸ Although Berg's letter relating to this scandal shows that he was not, in fact, too upset by the events, it gave Adorno all the ammunition he needed to demonstrate his exclusivity rights to absolute verities: '*Wozzeck*, like no other aesthetic construction of our times, has a part in the truth, and everything that exists will sooner crumble before the truth than wield any power to eradicate it. A dead deputy mayor can do as little to change this as a living critic can.'

'The trouble with the Jews is...'

The *Wozzeck* 'incident' in Prague reminds us that the Adorno/Berg correspondences coincided with the emergence of the National Socialists in Germany (Hitler eventually came to power in 1933) and the general rise of Fascism in Austria and the surrounding regions prior to this. What is striking here is the strange mood of acceptance with which intellectuals reported the shifting political realities. There is a bizarre calm in the accounts of the Nazi's successes, which make uneasy reading now (with our advantage of hindsight). It is, in fact, the non-dramatic way in which German society was squeezing the Jews out that gives these reports on bureaucratic Fascism a Kafkaesque chill. Implicit in this, one supposes, was a reticent belief that Hitler would not last long in power and, of course, a naïveté in the understanding of just how far the Nazis (if they gained and maintained power) would be prepared to go in relation to the 'Jewish Question'. The first indication in the letters that things were changing for the worse came during the Reichstag elections on the 14th. of September 1930 when the Nazis had won 107 seats, 95 more than they had had previously. Adorno tells Berg that '...life in Germany is becoming more problematic every day for a thousand reasons, and I often consider it a blessing that you have not yet come to Berlin after all, but remain in Austria, where in spite of all, the people, as the last elections show, are a little more human than the Germans, who have succumbed to a demonic stupidity.'

⁸ Otakar Ostrčil (1879 – 1935) was a Czech composer and conductor.

Although the shift to the extreme right was slow, it was consistent and soon the use of the word 'Aryan' had very specific and sinister consequences for Adorno (who was half-Jewish). On September the 8th. 1933 Adorno wrote to Berg 'I did not give any lectures at the university last semester, and will hardly do so during the next, but must instead, as a "non-Aryan", reckon with having the *venia legendi* taken away from me on account of the civil service law.' (The *venia legendi* was Adorno's licence to teach, which was withdrawn from him on September the 11th.). Having lost the licence 'on account of the Aryan paragraph', Adorno spent much time seeking a position elsewhere. He also sought Berg's assistance who subsequently wrote to Edward Dent, Professor of Music at Cambridge University in England, with a view to finding Adorno a suitable placement. Although Berg was positive about the chances of success, ('so my "letter of recommendation", which speaks of you in the most effusive manner, could very well have an effect.'), Dent's reply crushed any optimism.

It is a rather astonishing letter in that it highlights the official stance taken by the British government in relation to the support of Jewish intellectuals in the emerging dangerous political environment in Germany at the time. It also demonstrates an array of murky anti-Semite notions expressed by Dent himself. Initially, he attempted to outline the situation in Britain regarding the poor level of employment among musicians and therefore an unwillingness for any musical institution to employ German Jews while a British musician could fill the position. 'This is why the authorities (Home Office and Labour Office), as well as people like my very good friends Sir Hugh Allen (director of the Royal College of Music in London) and Sir John McEwen (director of the Royal Academy of Music), are unwilling to take on any German-Jewish teachers in their institutions.' Soon, however, Dent, in a moment of extraordinary arrogance, exposed his racist side: 'The trouble with the Jews is that they are almost all egotists and careerists. I have been observing for a long time, especially with "German" Jews, that they think only of their own careers, not about the musical welfare of all...Consequently, all Jews want to live and work in a capital city...Now, Germany has had a surplus of musical production for years, and Austria even more so; this is why you (as also Kodály and Bartók etc.) take it for granted that you can earn your money primarily in Germany. You [note in Berg's hand: "(The Jews?)"] are indeed Hitlerians, as you consider Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Holland, Scandinavia, Czechoslovakia and perhaps even England as belonging to "Germany"!!!' Berg had passed the letter on to Adorno - 'All I shall say is that I naturally did not write to Dent any more after you gave me access to his unspeakable letter.' Dent's letter, indeed, exposes clearly the level of anti-Semitic feeling which existed way beyond the pale of Germany and Austria both officially and unofficially, and certainly raises questions regarding the level of collusion in anti-Semitic behaviour practised by officially non-Fascist countries.

The pressure on Jews throughout Germany was steadily increasing. In a correspondence dated the 28th. of November 1933, Adorno was apparently optimistic in gaining admission to the State Chamber of Letters (the Reichkulturkammer) - 'I am here (in Berlin) in order to effect my admission to the Reichkulturkammer, which the possibility of publication depends on - but I seem to be succeeding...There are indeed certain indications that non-Aryan intellectuals will be able to retain their work.' He was denied admission in a letter dated the 20th. of February 1935 and would soon move to England. Meanwhile, Berg would not see the year out and, in his last letter to Adorno, seemed to have, at last, understood how despairing the European situation was. 'After the 100% hopelessness in Germany comes 100% hopelessness in Austria, where I am not Catholic enough for the Catholics and not Jewish enough for the Jews (& that is all that counts at present).'

The 'Frankfurt School'

In light of Adorno's stalwart defense of the Schoenberg circle and his unfaltering attacks on neo-classicism, it would perhaps be useful to keep in mind that at this stage he was, in fact, still a rather young and highly partisan ideologue. A characteristic weakness of Adorno was his almost inexhaustible trust in established theories such as Marxism and psychoanalysis (as well as the teachings of the Second Viennese School). The seeds of Adorno's rejection of the objectivism of neo-classical structures may well have been sown even before his involvement with Berg and his 'extensive confrontation' with Benjamin. His doctoral thesis was written under the tutelage of the philosopher Hans Cornelius, whose central doctrine was the rejection of every dogmatic claim, every conjecture of the existence of external data in favour of an ordering of ideas within the framework of consciousness.⁹ Adorno's thesis ('The Transcendence of the Material and Noematic in Husserl's Phenomenology') was written very much in the spirit of Cornelius and rejected every attempt at a philosophy that was geared towards objective concepts. It does not come as a surprise, therefore, that in his writings on music we see Adorno using terms like 'personality', 'soul', 'inwardness' and 'experience' - language that offers credibility to subjectivity. We can assume, therefore, that it was indeed Cornelius who inculcated early in Adorno his rejection of an assumed objectivity.

Furthermore, Adorno had become associated with a movement headed mostly by Jewish intellectuals, sociologists and philosophers which came to be known as the Institut für Sozialforschung (Institute for Social Research) best known as the institutional home of the 'Frankfurt School'. These intellectuals included Erich Fromm, Leo Löwenthal, Carl Grünberg, Friedrich Pollock, Max Horkheimer and Henryk Grossman, among others.¹⁰ Horkheimer edited the group's journal *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* (Journal for Social Research) and all those connected wrote essays for the journal defining a critical theory of society which introduced its readers to the spirit of the Institute and which hoped to advance a comprehensive claim to revolutionising bourgeois society on a social, political, psychological and cultural level. The Institute also represented a claim to power on the part of the left-wing intelligentsia who felt that they had found a key to understanding the basic problems of human existence in a Marxist and psychoanalytical theory.

The Institute for Social Research provided the young Adorno with the radical environment with which to construe all the unfolding compositional developments of the period via a Marxist rendering. This influence was to exercise greater power as time went on and, in the coming years, provided Adorno with a moral certitude that was to further undermine what was left of his objectivity of perception and interpretation; readings would become more extreme, interpretations would become more simplistically polemic. In the first *Journal for Social research* Adorno had addressed music in an essay entitled 'The Social Situation of Music'. Here his developing Marxism allowed him to postulate two types of music: one which supported bourgeois society and strove for

⁹ Johannes Wilhelm Cornelius (1863–1947) was a German neo-Kantian philosopher.

¹⁰ Erich Fromm (1900 – 1980) was an internationally renowned German-American psychologist and humanistic philosopher. Leo Löwenthal (1900–1993) was a German sociologist usually associated with the Frankfurt School. Carl Grünberg (1891-1972) was a German writer and journalist. Friedrich Pollock (1894 –1970) was a German social scientist and philosopher. Together with Adorno and Herbert Marcuse, Max Horkheimer (1895-1973) was the foremost representative of the 'Critical Theory' associated with the Institute of Social Research (or 'Frankfurt School'). Horkheimer became director of the Institute in 1930, organised its move into exile from Nazi Germany and supervised the return of the Institute to Frankfurt in 1949. Henryk Grossman (1881-1950) studied law and economics in Kraków and Vienna. In 1925 he joined the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt.

commercial success, and the other which turned its back on that society and took a stance on the side of pure art. This was not a differentiation between light and serious music but rather music which he perceived enhanced bourgeois values and music which he saw as being 'progressive'. Adorno picked out *Der Rosenkavalier* for criticism in that its diatonicism 'is cleansed of all dangerous enzymes...with this intellectual sacrifice to consumer consciousness, Strauss's productive power is extinguished.'¹¹ Schoenberg, on the other hand, was represented as the main exponent of progressive music.

This Marxist reading interpreted the liberation of the dissonance as a model for 'social antinomies' and therefore as a critique of society.¹² All connections with established musical models were rejected; Schoenberg's music had released itself from the 'reflection of an "agreement" of bourgeois society with the psyche of the individual...'.¹³ Adorno insisted on placing neo-classical forms on the wrong side of the fence opposite Schoenberg. This was the 'musical objectivism' that 'wore the masks of bygone styles and either played cynical games or sought to return to a prescriptive order.'¹⁴ It was through his involvement with the Marxist theorists of the Frankfurt School that Adorno extolled a music free from tonality (therefore liberated from the bourgeois market forces) and free from pre-established forms (that is, neo-classical structures). A music internally driven was the crucial criterion for the quality of a work, while borrowed objectivity was discredited as one of the fundamental untruths of the times; an animosity was postulated between the desire for objective order and subjective cognisance. He even went so far as to state (quite bizarrely!) that the link between the 'Russian émigré Stravinsky' and 'Fascism' was beyond question.¹⁵ This polemic reading can only be viewed as over simplistic. Adorno's exclusive endorsement of the Second Viennese School, apart from being overtly Germanic-centred, didn't even pause to consider events in Russia with the phenomena of Shostakovich and Prokofiev; the late Romantic Italian opera genre kept vitally alive by Puccini; the late Nationalists Nielson, Sibelius; not to mention the American and French equations. Though certain aspects of his theory might even be more relevant today (particularly those highlighting the relationship between accessibility and the market force), clearly, his terms of reference were far too narrow and his assessment of Stravinsky's achievements opprobriously extreme.

'...transparent as glass, without secrets...'

'What I would like most is to limit what I write about music...(to that) which I feel it is necessary in art-political terms to propagate: that is, you and Schoenberg.' Understanding Adorno's politics in the context of the emerging Frankfurt School and his obvious loyalty to the Second Viennese School makes his criticisms of the 'strict one', as he called Schoenberg, all the more surprising. There seems, on the other hand, to have been very little substantial correspondence between Adorno and Schoenberg and there is a sense, reading the Adorno/Berg letters, that the former never really felt accepted by Schoenberg into the inner circle. When Adorno was squeezed out of the editorship

¹¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. R. Tiedmann (Frankfurt am Main, 1997) 'On the Social Situation of Music' Essay on Music ed. Leppert.

¹² *ibid*

¹³ *ibid*

¹⁴ *ibid*

¹⁵ *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* (1932) p. 117.

of the music journal *Anbruch*, Schoenberg was among a number of people who had criticised him.¹⁶ Naturally, as Adorno was promulgating the cause of the dodecaphonists during his editorship of the journal, he took Schoenberg's criticism very personally. His subsequent letter to Berg, while blind to the one-sidedness of his own editorial work (which was supposed to be non-partisan), didn't hold back on its attack on Schoenberg. In fact, it may very well have exposed some unpalatable truths about Schoenberg's character: '...the paper under my initiative was at least an attempt to speak the truth in musical matters and to address those grave realities that are suppressed everywhere else...today. My concrete measure in this was the work of Schoenberg and his closest circle...I attempted to enforce my Schoenberg policy alone...If now...Schoenberg too is stabbing me in the back and sabotaging the little that I undertook in the interests of the cause that he himself embodies, this can only outrage me. This is a case of that stupid and solipsistic "sovereignty" that considers itself exempt from all human obligations on account of its genius and achievements.'

On receiving the first of Berg's *Four Songs for Middle-Register Voice and Piano* op. 3, Adorno was content to show his ambivalence towards Schoenberg '...the first bars...are among the most beautiful moments that could still have been wrested from our expiring tonality; and how clearly it is already Berg in its restraint and shy warmth, in spite of its seemingly Schoenbergian technique and economy.' Rather astonishingly, Adorno went on to highlight intrinsic flaws (as he saw them) in Schoenberg's music. In some letters written in 1927 he complains: '...his (works) have themselves become historical...What seems tragic to me is that his last works have all been absolutely right in their conception - but neither has he overcome their challenges at the aural level, nor do they overcome the listener! If nothing were to remain but this music, one would have to despair!' But perhaps the most extraordinary admission is made on hearing (for the fifth time) Berg's *Lyric Suite*: 'I cannot hide from you that the *3rd. Quartet* by Schoenberg...is in all seriousness no match for it (*Lyric Suite*)...for all its technical comfort and all the greatness of its distanced objectivity. Its humanity has become mute...I can no longer ignore the realisation that, for Schoenberg, the twelve-tone technique did become a recipe after all, and functions mechanically...Essentially we all know it, only no one yet dares to say so...I cannot imagine how the last of Schoenberg's pieces are to have a history: already now they are as transparent as glass, without secrets - there it is.' This is a remarkable admission for Adorno to make - that the twelve-tone technique, as espoused by Schoenberg, might very well offer nothing more than a compositional cul-de-sac! 'Being myself deeply involved in composition once more...I am faced with the antimony at every second: that non-dodecaphony lacks constructive rigour and constraint; but that dodecaphony severely restricts all construction coming from the imagination, and constantly invokes the danger of rigidity. While I would never give voice to my doubts in public, I cannot keep them from you...'

'...I would never give voice to my doubts in public...'

What are we to make of this? In more recent times, Adorno's Marxist and psychoanalytical glosses on Stravinsky have been taken somewhat with a pinch of salt (not to mention his absurd theory of a

¹⁶ In 1919, Universal Edition launched *Musicblätter des Anbruch*, the first music journal designed specifically to promote new music. In January 1929 Adorno joined the editing board. There was inevitable conflict of interests between the publishing house on the one hand and contributors on the other, with the result that critical freedom was limited. This eventually led to Adorno's removal from the editorship as his work was obviously extremely partisan.

'castration complex' in relation to jazz).¹⁷ However, these, at times, fierce and constant public attacks on neo-classicism which were made specifically at a time when he was privately expressing doubts about the twelve-tone technique show a moral ineptitude of startling proportions. Schoenberg, for his part, many years later (in a letter to his publisher commenting on Adorno's 'Philosophy of Modern Music' published in 1946) admitted 'I have never been able to bear the fellow...now I know that he has clearly never liked my music.' Elsewhere he says 'He knows everything about my music but he has no idea of the creative process involved.'¹⁸ Adorno had taken it upon himself to politicise and polemicise dodecaphony in a way that its composers did not readily intend, being, as they were, more concerned with the development of a new way of composing rather than espousing a new or right 'Marxist' form of composition.¹⁹

In fact, Schoenberg rejected outside attempts to radicalise his developments as he saw them not as revolutions in musical thought but rather as continuations of an ongoing history of tonality (hence his rejection of the negative term 'atonality'). He understood the 'truth' in music (and we will return to Adorno's notion of 'truth' later) as merely that which was coherent and consistent, that which had beauty of form. For Schoenberg, these ideals paralleled attributes he located in the music of Bach, Mozart and Beethoven: a total command of compositional procedures necessary to create an appropriate form at the service of a compelling realisation of musical ideas. This was an understanding of music which excluded any political manipulation. Despite this, Adorno insisted on fitting square pegs into round holes, and his position as a cool and authoritative observer was at odds with his analytical prognoses interpreted through the prism of Marxism and psychoanalysis. Obviously, Berg (and perhaps even the reluctant Schoenberg) saw in Adorno a useful propagandist, but there is little or no detailed response from Berg to Adorno's more psychoanalytical interpretations of dodecaphony. When Adorno claimed that Schoenberg had involved himself in the 'undisguised and uninhibited expression of the psyche', he was attempting to bring his work into close correlation with psychoanalysis.²⁰ However, the letters fail to demonstrate any two-way discussion of psychoanalysis in relation to either Berg's or Schoenberg's music (years later Stockhausen was to accuse Adorno of looking for a chicken in an abstract painting).

Furthermore, whenever Adorno attempted to influence the nomenclature applied to some of Berg's works claiming that it should, in no way, hint at neo-classicism, he was usually met with direct responses which swept his reasoning to the side. On the *Lyric Suite*, for example, he insisted that Berg should call it a String Quartet '...for the massively expansive spread of its disposition already exceeds its suite character. A dance piece simply has nothing in common with the absolute gravity of your music. What is more, one should keep one's distance, externally too, from the new - fascist

¹⁷ Adorno's absurd psychoanalytical reading of jazz reached its apogee in Briefwechsel Band 1: 1927-1937, Adorno/Horkheimer ed. Godde/Lonitz (Frankfurt am Main 2003). Here, he claimed that jazz's tendency for the beat to come too early or too late was a musical representation of impotence, failed orgasm, *coitus interruptus* and the fear of castration!

¹⁸ Hans Heinz Stuckenschmidt, *Arnold Schoenberg: His Life, World, and Work*, trans. Humphrey Searle (New York 1978), p. 508.

¹⁹ In time, Schoenberg did become more politically active and indeed shifted towards Zionism as evidenced by some of his writings and compositions like *Kol nidre für Sprecher (Rabbi)*, *gemischten Chor und Orchester* (1938), *A Survivor from Warsaw* (1947) and the late Psalm settings. However, it should be noted that although his growing politicisation influenced his subject matter, it did not alter the way he composed. That is, that there was no correlation between the subject matter and the materials, structures and forms employed to couch it. Hence, the opening quote '...by what chord would one diagnose the Marxist confession in a piece of music, and by what colour the Fascist one in a picture?'

²⁰ Heinz Ludwig Arnold (ed.), *Text und Kritik: Theodor W. Adorno* (Munich 1977), p. 77.

- classicism.' Berg responded simply that 'the quartet most certainly is a suite, even a lyric suite.' It is worth keeping in mind at this point that Berg was a product of a Viennese bourgeoisie that still bathed in the haze of the Habsburg Empire which had just recently expired (his wife, Helene Nahowski was rumoured to be the illegitimate daughter of the Emperor Franz Joseph!); and although he emerged out of the post-Habsburg era of the Vienna Secession, which ushered in a new intellectual revolution, he was hardly one to charge into the trenches of cultural warfare. Despite Adorno's insistence that the use of Hauptmann's *Und Pippa tanzt* for an opera (discussed earlier) would be a cultural and political mistake, Berg, did in fact, decide on the fairy tale, presumably, because he was neither convinced by Adorno's political arguments nor felt a personal obligation to explore a more historically valid or political theme.

Although it is obvious that Schoenberg, Berg and Webern were inextricably linked and dedicated to their cause and that they opposed the principle of neo-classicism, Adorno seemed all too willing to pit Stravinsky against the Second Viennese School in a very public cultural battle in order, it would seem, to advance his own idiosyncratic theories of Marxism. Indeed, his language often reflected a warlike stance. 'Tomorrow I am to have a discussion with Strobel, the enemy, on the radio, about neo-classicism; then I have also written a big article to settle the score with Hindemith and his ilk...'. However, this polemical dispute between the two movements does not seem to have been fuelled publicly by the composers themselves to anything like the extreme degree favoured by Adorno. Schoenberg, for his part, rejected Adorno's psychopathological critique of Stravinsky. Hence, (in the same letter above) he states 'It is disgusting how he treats Stravinsky. I am certainly no admirer of Stravinsky, although I like a piece of his here and there very much - but one should not write like that.' While in his 'Poetics of Music' Stravinsky offers 'Whatever opinion one may hold about the music of Arnold Schoenberg (to take as an example a composer evolving along lines essentially different than mine, both aesthetically and technically)...it is impossible for a self-respecting mind equipped with genuine musical culture not to feel that the composer of *Pierrot Lunaire* is fully aware of what he is doing and is not trying to deceive anyone. He adapted the musical system that suited his needs, he is perfectly consistent with himself, perfectly coherent.'

²¹

...while Rome burned...

Adorno's rejection of the neo-classicists can be understood in his idea of 'authenticity', that is, what he considered (to use one of his favoured words) 'truth' in music. The relativism of these words - 'truth', 'authenticity' - was not always given clarification by Adorno but a central tenet of his argument was dichotomous; authentic musical works should have two specific and opposing characteristics, that is, that as well as being autonomous constructs capable of withstanding objective scrutiny, they must also shiver in the 'aftershock of the most extreme terror' (an extremity that echoes Kafka's assertion that we need not waste our time on books which do not come on us like an ice-pick, shattering what is frozen in our skulls and spirit). This is clearly a post-Shoah stance which insists that the perfection of the art work cannot remain unscarred in the wake of the dehumanisation of the death-camps, hence Adorno's 'scars of damage and disruption are the modern's seal of authenticity.' Those works, on the other hand, which prevented the social and the historical to trespass on their autonomy, which were happy to rely on received forms and structures, which showed no signs of scarring or the internalisation of suffering, Adorno called 'resigned art'. Apart from rejecting almost all tonal music, this argument provided the context for attacks on

²¹ Igor Stravinsky: *Poetics of Music*: Harvard University Press, 1942 (p. 13). ISBN 0-674-67856-7

Stravinsky as malicious and sarcastic as 'he visits today's bomb craters tomorrow with sightseers in the state carriage of the ancien régime, and the blue bird soon builds its peaceful nest in them.'

But the question we must ask today is whether Adorno's rejection of the neo-classical is itself 'authentic'. Can we assume that he alone had the monopoly on how the *Endlösung*, or any other betrayal of humanity, should be responded to artistically? Is it not equally valid to assume that any attempt to produce art in such time constitutes a betrayal of suffering? Nero, who infamously fiddled while Rome burned, is castigated, not for the type of music he played, but for the very act of creating music while suffering was an historical reality. His actions represent for us an unacceptable private indulgence in the face of collective horror. In light of Nero, could the neo-classicist approach not be interpreted as the most honest reply to the barbarity of the 'thirty years War' (as George Steiner calls the period from 1914 to 1944)? Could it not equally be considered 'authentic' that to create art devoid of human involvement and emotion, to write music that, in the most existential way, sings mute, is the most adequate response to the bestiality of the twentieth century?

Adorno remained entwined within an orthodoxy associated with the doctrines that had determined his politics, and this coloured his pronouncements on music in a way which, today, many consider rather naïve. The results are often disappointing because his, at times, sharply discerning insights are frequently deformed through an idiosyncratic Marxist post-Freudian psycho-jargon. He attempted to promote the Second Viennese School as the sole moral choice available (contrary to the views of its progenitors) and demote all other music styles as impotent and irrelevant. Significantly, Adorno's claim (as late as 1962) that neo-classicism 'has all but vanished', undoubtedly failed to foresee that neo-classicism was the kernel of, and precursor to, developments that static structures in music would make in the post-modernism of the latter half of the twentieth century at the hands of Reich, Feldman, Andriessen, Ligeti, Part and Zorn among others, and that these elaborations would be inspired by a myriad of sources including mechanical and computer engineering, Buddhism, ethnic African and east-Asian music, mathematical theories, Renaissance church music, algorithms – influences which would emanate from a much broader spectrum than what was ever envisaged or encapsulated by Adorno's narrower political perspectives.²²

Even beyond the scope of music there are many other examples of Adorno's work which are dubiously tainted by extreme readings. His politically-orchestrated sociological paper of 1943 'The Authoritarian Personality', for example, absurdly attempted to measure a Fascist potential in people - based on a series of simple questions, interviewees were graded on an F-scale!²³ In the end, Adorno's own inflexible understanding of 'truth' in music led to his eventual rejection of even his 'master and teacher'. The relative comprehensibility and popularity of Berg's Violin Concerto displayed an affirmation, a positivism, an aesthetic perfection embodying a sensuality and spirituality that could not be tolerated within Adorno's held view of a scarred and damaged 'authenticity'.²⁴ The more theories are guided by a certainty that they fulfill a moral mission, the greater the risk that they will, in time, fall foul of a new emerging paradigm. It would seem that

²² T.W.Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. Pickford (New York, Columbia University Press 1998) p. 48.

²³ T.W.Adorno (with Frenkel-Brunswick;Levinson; Nevitt Sandford et al.): *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York 1950).

²⁴ This combination of the religious and the sensual is epitomised in Berg's simultaneous use of the markings *amoroso* and *religioso* at the end of the *Violin Concerto* - bar 222.

Adorno's musical observations, as witnessed in these correspondences, although acutely penetrating, often remain trapped in a Marxist/psychoanalytical paradigm of his own invention which has long since been superseded.